

Why do people become foster parents and how to recruit new families? A multi-informant study

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ABSTRACT

The shortage of foster families in child protection systems worldwide is a critical issue that requires a deeper understanding of culturally situated approaches to recruit new families. This study aimed to explore public awareness of foster care, examine barriers and enablers to becoming a foster family, and draw on behavioural theory to inform the development of outreach and recruitment strategies. Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews with 29 participants (14 foster parents, 15 staff; Portugal) and subjected to a thematic analysis. The results suggested that there was limited public knowledge about foster care. Becoming a foster parent was linked both with reflective motivational processes (e.g., child-centred motivations) and the availability of multidimensional resources (e.g., social support), but multi-level constraints were identified as barriers to becoming a foster parent (e.g., worries related to the foster child). Integrated outreach strategies (e.g., combining tailored and mass media approaches) with a range of communication channels and vehicles may raise awareness and enable the recruitment of more foster families. Participants indicated that message content should involve system-related information and evidence about the positive impact of fostering, among other aspects. Overall, this multi-informant study provides conceptually grounded and practice-relevant insights to support the recruitment of prospective foster families.

1. Introduction

Removing a child from their birth family should only be done as a last resort (Barth & Lloyd, 2010). Child separation from their birth family may involve a traumatic experience that evokes feelings of loss and grief (Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010), which might be worsened by placement instability (Unrau et al., 2008). Children and young people placed in alternative care, such as foster care, are more likely to experience mental health disorders (e.g., Engler et al., 2022; Oswald et al., 2010), low education attainments (e.g., Geiger & Beltran, 2017; Harris et al., 2009) and developmental delays due to previous risk, adversity, or maltreatment (Oswald et al., 2010). In cases where child removal is needed to protect the child, foster care is the preferable alternative care to residential care, given placement in foster care may improve the quality of their attachment with significant people (secure attachment) (West et al., 2020; Smyke et al., 2010) and promote more adaptive functioning (e.g., academic performance, happiness, behaviour outcomes; Fernandez, 2008). In fact, some studies have suggested that

children in foster care may show higher levels of subjective well-being than children in residential care and similar levels to children and young people in the general population (e.g., Delgado et al., 2019, Delgado et al., 2020; Llosada-Gistau et al., 2017).

However, the number of children in care is much higher than the number of available foster families in several countries (e.g., Estonia, see Raudkivi, 2020; Portugal, see ISS, 2023; Greece, see UNICEF, 2022). Thus, one of the main challenges to increase the number of foster families is to identify barriers and enablers to fostering children and to develop tailored and potentially effective recruitment messages and strategies. In fact, developing communication and recruitment campaigns that generate awareness about foster care and help increase the number of prospective foster families has been identified in research over the past decade as a relevant area of intervention (Berrick et al., 2011; Diogo & Branco, 2017; Magalhães et al., 2022). Previous work has identified a range of possible communication channels and vehicles to promote foster care, such as newspapers, television, radio, cinema, advertisements on public transport and outdoors, and information

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pamphlets (e.g., López et al., 2010). Online platforms in general and social media in particular have also gained increased importance in communication campaigns, due to the relatively low cost to implement and facility to access and promote interaction between members of the audience (Chiang et al., 2019; López et al., 2010). Promoting interpersonal contact (e.g., word-of-mouth) has also been referred to as a key strategy, as it allows direct contact with those who perform this role, first-hand access to information that is perceived as more authentic, and the possibility of asking questions on the spot (Canali et al., 2016; Cox et al., 2003; López et al., 2010; Sebba, 2012). Despite these broad inputs to promote foster care and increase the number of prospective foster families, there is very limited evidence to guide actual strategies and content development for communication campaigns on this topic. The current study aims to address this knowledge gap.

Moreover, research that examines the self-reported reasons for becoming a foster family may yield outcomes that are useful to improve recruitment strategies (e.g., Magalhães et al., 2022), as it allows to develop and messages and campaigns that target outcome-relevant beliefs or motivations (e.g., Lewis et al., 2016). Several studies have shown that altruistic and child-centred reasons are the most reported reasons for becoming a foster family (Canali et al., 2016; De Maeyer et al., 2014; Diogo & Branco, 2017; Gouveia et al., 2021; López & Del Valle, 2016; Rodger et al., 2006; Sebba, 2012). These reasons include protecting the child from further harm (e.g., Sebba, 2012) and providing care and affection to a child (e.g., De Maeyer et al., 2014). Other reasons have also been identified, such as societal-oriented motivations (e.g., desire to do something for the community/society; De Maeyer et al., 2014), family-centred motivations (e.g., new experience and family enrichment; Migliorini et al., 2018) and self-centred motivations (e.g., having previous cared for children and wanting children at home; De Maeyer et al., 2014).

Apart from these reflective motivations (e.g., reasons for fostering; Sebba, 2012), research in the field has also focused on sociodemographic variables (e.g., gender, age, income; Contreras & Muñoz, 2016; Ciarrochi et al., 2012). These reasons for fostering have been explained in the literature according to the Theory of Resources (Cox et al., 2003), which argues that the more resources a person has, the greater the probability of sharing with others (e.g., high income; De Maeyer et al., 2014). These approaches are meaningful and relevant per se, but do not account for other potentially relevant variables that are seen as critical across different topics and domains, as suggested by broad-scope models within social and behavioural sciences. Broad-scope models of behaviour propose that intention and behaviour are influenced not only by individual factors (e.g., motivation, capability; Mayne, 2016; Michie et al., 2011) but also by social factors, namely in terms of opportunities (e.g., social support; Michie et al., 2011) and constraints that may emerge from the context. Here, we draw on insights from two broad-scope models developed in the field of psychology (HAPA model, Schwarzer, 2008; COM-B system of behaviour, Michie et al., 2011) to explore and extend the range of factors that may be linked with becoming a foster family.

1.1. Broad-scope models of attitudes and behaviours: The COM-B system and the HAPA model

The COM-B system proposes that behaviour occurs through the interaction of variables across three components: capability, opportunity, and motivation (Michie et al., 2011). Capability involves both the physical and psychological capacity to adopt a certain behaviour, which requires skills and knowledge (e.g., comprehension, reasoning). Opportunity refers to all external factors, such as physical (e.g., home conditions) and/or social (e.g., social pressure, norms) factors, that make the behaviour possible. Lastly, motivation includes reflective (i.e., conscious beliefs, values, goals, plans) and automatic (e.g., desires, emotional responses, habits, impulses) psychological processes that energise the behaviour. This model proposes that variables across the

three components are linked with each other and necessary to enable a given target behaviour (Michie et al., 2011; West et al., 2020), such as becoming a foster family. However, specific variables within each component (i.e., capability, opportunity, motivation) are contingent on the target outcome, as well as the target group or population.

Although we refer to the COM-B system for its heuristic value, there are also conceptually flexible models within social and behavioural sciences that have addressed the “intention-behaviour gap” more specifically, given that people do not always necessarily act according to their intentions (e.g., Fishbein et al., 2003; Sniehotta et al., 2005). This suggests that intention needs to be complemented with other more proximal factors, which help to translate the intention into a given action. A model that explicitly addresses these factors is the HAPA model (Schwarzer, 2008), which distinguishes between (a) pre-intention motivational processes that lead to a behavioural intention and (b) post-intention volitional processes that lead to actual behaviour. Variables seen as relevant for the pre-intention motivational processes are risk perception (i.e., perceived severity of a specific condition and personal vulnerability), outcome expectations (i.e., perception of potential consequences of a behaviour), and task self-efficacy, also referred as action self-efficacy or pre-action self-efficacy (i.e., optimistic belief about one’s ability to engage in a behavior). Variables seen as relevant for the post-intention volitional processes include action planning (i.e., having a concrete plan for performing a target behaviour), coping planning (i.e., anticipate challenging situations and make plans to deal with them), and coping self-efficacy, also referred as maintenance self-efficacy (i.e., optimistic belief about the capacities to deal with potential barriers), among others (see Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020). Here, we explore the utility of these broad-scope models in identifying factors related to becoming a foster family. Specifically, we propose to use these models to observe the perspectives of foster families and staff on variables that are considered relevant to becoming a foster family and to generate insights for designing outreach strategies and campaigns.

1.2. The current study: background, aims, and approach

The body of evidence on the factors related to becoming a foster family is still mostly atheoretical, which limits an integrated and comprehensive understanding of the variables involved in this process. In addition, there is limited evidence to guide efforts to recruit new foster families, despite the urgent need to increase the pool of promising and prospective foster parents (Reimer, 2021). To address these limitations, the current study aimed to explore foster parents and staff’s perspectives in the foster care system 1) linked with public awareness about foster care; 2) provide a more integrated view of barriers and enablers to becoming a foster family; and 3) generate insights to guide strategy and content development for culturally situated campaigns to promote foster care and recruit foster families. We relied on input from two broad-scope models of behaviour (COM-B system, Michie et al., 2011; HAPA model, Schwarzer, 2008) to develop the interview guide and support the interpretation of the results. Rather than applying these models in a top-down or prescriptive manner, they offered a conceptual lens to organize participant perspectives around key behavioral domains such as motivation, capability, and opportunity. This approach also supported the identification of recruitment and outreach strategies grounded in behavior change principles – an added value in a field where empirical work remains relatively scarce, mostly descriptive, and largely atheoretical.

We conducted this study in the Portuguese context, where foster care continues to have a reduced expression (about 4.1 % of children in care are in foster care; ISS, 2024), which perpetuates a culture of institutionalisation. Since 2020 there has been an increase in placements in foster care, with an increase of 6 % in 2020 and 11 % in 2021. However, as in many other countries (e.g., Estonia, see Raudkivi, 2020; Greece, see UNICEF, 2022) more systematic and consistent dissemination efforts are needed in Portugal to recruit and select new foster families (Delgado,

2010; Delgado et al., 2015; Delgado et al., 2018). In Portugal, applicants must be at least 25 years old, meet minimum standards for physical and mental health, offering suitable housing and have no criminal history. According to recent legislative changes, foster families in Portugal may now have familial ties to the children (Decree-Law No. 37/2025).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

In this study, we wanted to explore the perspective of foster parents and staff as they are experiential experts and to enhance the ecological validity of the current study. For this reason, we recruited a purposive sample from the three geographical regions in Portugal where there are the highest numbers of foster families: Lisbon, Porto, and Madeira Island. The individual interviews were carried out in Portuguese and via Zoom. First, we requested collaboration from three entities working in the context of foster care in those regions by informing them about the study's aims. After this first contact, two directors of the entities requested a meeting via ZOOM to clarify the objectives of the present study, the number of participants required, as well as the procedures adopted to collect data and the conditions for participation. Then, each entity contacted foster families and staff to inform them about the present study and requested authorisation to share their email addresses and/or telephone contacts with the research team. Participation was voluntary, and individuals who agreed to be contacted were subsequently invited to take part in the study. As such, this study included 29 participants, 14 foster parents and 15 staff (including three directors) working in the Portuguese foster care system. In 2022, national statistics reported that there were 168 active foster parents, meaning that this sample included circa 8 % of the population (ISS, 2023). Almost all foster parents were female (97 %), most were married (79 %), and their age ranged between 35 to 56 years ($M = 44.21$, $SD = 5.55$). Regarding their education, 43 % had completed high school, 36 % had completed a bachelor's degree, and 21 % had completed a master's degree. Most foster parents had two biological and/or adopted children (54 %), and all parents were fostering just one child at the time of data collection. Moreover, most foster parents belonged to households consisting of a twosome, own child(ren), and a child in care (79 %). From the remaining 21 %, 14 % were single-parent families with children and 7 % were single-parent families without children. Half of the foster parents reported previous knowledge and/or contact with the child protection system before becoming foster parents, though the majority were fostering for the first time (71 %). Length of time fostering varied between one month and 32 months, with an average of 12.79 months. National statistics do not capture data on the population of foster parents; although, it is possible to compare the sample of this study with two previous studies with large samples, one conducted by Delgado and colleagues (2013), with 168 foster families, and a second conducted by Pinto (2022), with 53 foster parents. It was found a similar overrepresentation of female foster parents (Pinto, 2022) and proportion of foster parents who were married (Delgado et al., 2013). Nonetheless, the current study, has a sample with younger foster parents, with higher level of education and lower level of experience in the role, given number of children they had fostered and length of time fostering. This can be contextualized by recent efforts to recruit new foster parents (ISS, 2023).

Regarding the children in care, 14 % were less than one year of age, 43 % were between one and six years and 43 % were more than six years old. Most children in care were male (71 %) and did not have previous placements (57 %), although a high percentage had experienced one previous placement (36 %) and 7 % had two or more previous placements. Considering national statistics, the current sample included foster parents with younger children than in the population (30 % between 0 and 5 years of age in the population) and with a larger representation of children who were male (59 % in the population). No data was

available on number of placements (ISS, 2023). The age of staff who participated in this study was between 28 and 63 years ($M = 45$, $SD = 7.83$), most were female (87 %), married (53 %), 40 % single and 7 % were in a common-law marriage. Regarding their education, 67 % had completed a bachelor's degree and 33 % had completed a master's, mainly in the field of Psychology (60 %), followed by Social Work (27 %) and Social Education (13 %). Three of the interviewees were directors. An average of 17 years of experience in the child protection system ($SD = 5.88$) and six years in the foster care system ($SD = 4.53$) were reported.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Sociodemographic questionnaires

Two sociodemographic questionnaires were developed, one version for foster families and the other for staff. The version for foster families measured individual (i.e., gender, age, marital status), academic and professional (i.e., educational qualifications and profession) characteristics of participants and their families (e.g., to have children and their ages). In addition, the questionnaire measured information regarding their role as foster families, such as previous contact with the child protection system, number of children fostered, length of past placements, and length of current placement. Finally, information was collected regarding the individual characteristics and previous placements of the children foster families were fostering at the time of the interview (i.e., age, gender).

The version for staff measured individual (i.e., gender, age, marital status), academic, and professional (i.e., course, profession) characteristics and assessed information associated with professional practice in the child protection system (i.e., time of experience in the child protection system and in foster care).

2.2.2. Semi-structured interviews

The interview guide was developed around three main sets of questions to address the three contributions of this study. The first set was focused on participants' general knowledge and awareness about foster care (i.e., "How did you hear or become familiar with foster care?").

The second set of questions focused on barriers and enablers to becoming a foster family and was grounded on the theoretical frameworks that guided this study. Specifically, based on the COM-B System of Behaviour, this set focused on capability (e.g., "What skills do you think you had that supported your decision to become a foster family?"), motivation (e.g., "What led you to become a foster family?"), and opportunity (e.g., "In this process of becoming a foster family, how would you describe the role of people in your social network, such as family and friends?"; "In addition to your social context that includes family and friends, how did the foster care system itself contribute to your intention to become a foster family?"). It also included questions aligned with the HAPA model, namely coping planning (e.g., "What kind of concerns, challenges or difficulties did you experience when you were thinking about becoming a foster family? How did you handle/overcome those challenges?"), outcome expectancies (e.g., "What expectations did you have, at the time, regarding your role as a foster family?"), and action planning (e.g., "Once you decided to become a foster family, how did the decision materialise? What did you do?").

The last set of questions focused on recruitment strategies (e.g., "How do you think more foster families could be recruited?", "Imagine that you have a decision-making role in the system with a view to better attracting and recruiting families, what would you do?") to generate insights to guide strategy and content development for campaigns to promote foster care and recruit foster families in the Portuguese context. The first version of the interview script was created by the first author and discussed with the other team members, who provided feedback to improve language, clarity, and theoretical alignment.

2.3. Data collection and analytical procedure

This study was approved by the Ethical Committee of ISCTE - University Institute of Lisbon (Ref. 92/2021). We then contacted each of the participants directly via email and telephone so the interviews could be scheduled. Prior to the beginning of the interviews, the participants were provided with an informed consent document through ZOOM screen sharing. The informed consent presented the study's aim, the voluntary, anonymous, and confidential nature of participation, as well as the right to refuse and cease at any time. In addition, information regarding personal data protection was provided and the contact details of the research team were made available for later contact (questions, clarifications), as well as the contact of the Data Protection Officer of ISCTE - University Institute of Lisbon. Consent was audio recorded and the data (i.e., audio files) were stored in a sharepoint with access restricted to the research team. Audio files were destroyed after transcription. The interviews ranged in length from 33 to 90 min, with an average length of 60 min.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the data were analysed using the NVivo software version 1.6.1. The sociodemographic data were analysed using IBM® SPSS® Statistics v29. We performed a thematic analysis through the identification and analysis of patterns (themes) in the data with a mixed (i.e., top-down and bottom-up) approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We relied on the structure of the interview script to create the first, overarching layer of meaning and organisation of our results (i.e., top-down), but created and interpreted the themes based on semantic criteria (i.e., bottom-up). We followed the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), namely: (1) familiarisation with the data; (2) production of initial codes; (3) theme exploration – classification of different codes into potential themes; (4) review of themes – to ensure the adequacy between the thematic map and the dataset; and (5) definition and naming of themes. Trustworthiness was ensured by a systematic scrutiny of the data analysis process through the discussion of the coding process among the researchers, and by

providing illustrative examples of participants' verbalisations. Furthermore, a second coder analysed 30 % of the data as per our thematic map and we computed a Cohen's Kappa coefficient to assess the reliability of the analysis. This yielded a Kappa = 0.865 (strong agreement; McHugh, 2012) in the data collected with the foster parents, a Kappa = 0.869 (strong agreement) in the data collected with the staff, and a Kappa = 0.867 (strong agreement) referring to the total data (foster parents and staff).

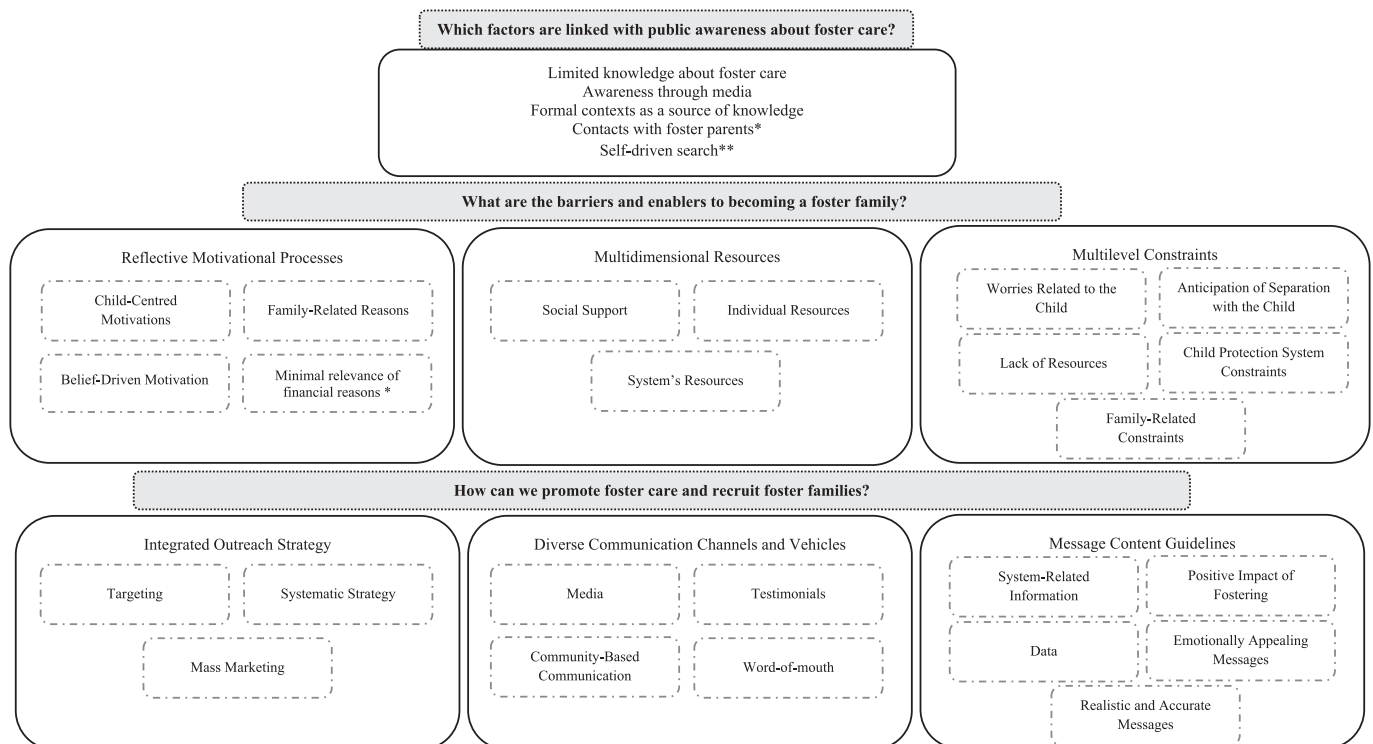
3. Results

The analysis of the results was structured according to the main objectives of the present study: 1) explore factors linked with public awareness about foster care; 2) provide a more integrated view of barriers and enablers to becoming a foster family; and 3) generate insights to guide strategy and content development for campaigns to promote foster care and recruit foster families (see Fig. 1).

3.1. Perceived public awareness about foster care

We identified three common themes among staff and foster parents about how they perceived public awareness about foster care (i.e., **Limited knowledge about foster care**, **Awareness through media**, and **Formal contexts as a source of knowledge**). In addition, among staff, we identified the theme **Contacts with foster parents**, and among foster parents the theme **Self-driven search**. Foster parents and staff perceived a **Limited knowledge about foster care**, both from the community and other staff (e.g., "The staff from different areas that intervene with these children, whether in terms of education, (...) health and others, also demonstrate a huge lack of knowledge."; Professional; Female, 63 years old).

Participants recognised **Awareness through media** via previous recruitment campaigns of foster care organisations in Portugal, and through films that portray this reality (e.g., "I heard about it through



Note. Themes and sub-themes identified only by staff are marked with an asterisk and by foster parents with two asterisks.

Fig. 1. Thematic map of findings.

advertising, on Expresso, it said (...) “LX fostering. Why not fostering a child?”. It was the first step, this ad”; Foster parent; Female, 50 years old).

In addition, participants identified **Formal contexts as a source of knowledge**, which means that public knowledge about foster care yielded from social interactions in different formal contexts (such as schools, church, or the child protection system) (e.g., “There are people (...) who are kindergarten teachers, for example, and who here have some contact with this aspect of promotion and protection in the professional field”; Professional; Female, 43 years old).

Staff also acknowledged that foster care awareness came from **Contacts with foster parents**, which means that foster families are important sources in the spread of knowledge (e.g., “The experience of other families, word of mouth (...). We ended up having some applications that came as a result of this knowledge and the experiences of other people who were also positive.”; Professional; Male, 41 years old). On the other hand, foster parents mentioned **Self-driven search** as a source of knowledge about foster care, in cases where they had the initiative to carry out the research on fostering, without having received any prior information on this subject (e.g., “I had already researched about it, the only thing I could find was *Mundos de Vida*, up there in the North [Porto], and as soon as I saw the advertisement [in Lisbon] I immediately grabbed this opportunity because there was nothing here [in Lisbon].”; Foster parent; Female, 45 years old).

3.2. Factors related to becoming a foster family

For both staff and foster parents, three main themes were found regarding the factors that may influence people to become a foster family: **Reflective motivational processes** (i.e., conscious beliefs, values and goals that seem to energise and direct the behaviour of becoming a foster family included four sub-themes: *Child-centred motivations*, *Family-related reasons*, *Belief-driven motivation* and *Minimal relevance of financial reasons*), **Multidimensional resources** (i.e., enablers of the behaviour to become a foster family, included three sub-themes: *Social support*, *Individual resources*, and *System’s resources*) and **Multilevel constraints** (i.e., barriers that inhibit the behaviour of becoming a foster family, including five sub-themes: *Worries related to the child in foster care*, *Anticipation of separation with the child*, *Lack of resources*, *Child protection system constraints*, and *Family-related constraints*).

Participants identified several reflective motivational processes that mobilised the behaviour of becoming a foster family, through four sub-themes, namely *Child-centred motivations*, the desire to care for a child preventing their placement in residential care (e.g., “It goes through this need to help, to prevent the child from going to an institution, to want to somehow provide a family; Professional; Female, 42 years old), *Family-related reasons*, for example, the need to fill the “empty nest” and wanting family-like company (e.g., “As my children are already grown up, sometimes, I feel alone (...). I think it was because, [I wanted] more company.”; Foster parent; Female, 42 years old) and *Belief-driven motivation*, as social responsibility and/or religious beliefs (e.g., “Changing the world of one person at a time. In the next generation, for my daughter and all her friends it will be natural to foster a child.”; Foster parent; Female, 44 years old). Staff also mentioned that prospective foster families were not driven by financial reasons for becoming a foster family (e.g., “I had some fear that there were more motivations associated with the (...) [financial reason], but they do not arise.”; Professional; Female, 45 years old) – *Minimal relevance of financial reasons*.

These motivations seem to lead people to become foster families; however, they emerged possibly being influenced by a set of resources. The theme **Multidimensional Resources** involves three sub-themes, namely *social*, *individual*, and *system’s resources*. Foster parents and staff identified *Social Support* as a critical resource, which means that they perceived formal support (e.g., availability and follow-up by the professional team, as well as the provision of training and adequate preparation for the role) and informal support (i.e., family, friends,

neighbours) as an important factor influencing the decision of becoming a foster family (e.g., “My family is always present, they always said: We will always be here when you need us.”; Foster parent; Female, 56 years old).

Participants also highlighted the importance of having *Individual Resources*. Having caregiving skills (e.g., the ability to give affection, care, and satisfy the needs of children) and social skills (e.g., emotional regulation) that facilitate the role of foster family, as well as self-efficacy beliefs, seem to have weight in the decision to become a foster parent. Moreover, additional individual resources such as having a household dynamic aligned with the requirements to care for a child in foster care (i.e., dynamics that already include children), time and housing conditions proved to be important aspects in the behaviour of becoming a foster family (e.g., “Resources that are often addressed are: okay, I have a house that has space.”; Professional; Female, 63 years old).

Alongside social support and individual resources, the *System’s resources* were identified as a relevant factor, namely the positive perception of the foster care system, in terms of competence, credibility and rigor, as well as the legal rights of foster families, such as the right to leave work due to an illness event or emergency related to the child in care (e.g., “We knew [wife and husband] that we could take a few days off from work, this is also important, because when a child arrives, he needs some time.”; Foster parent; Female, 48 years old).

Participants revealed **Multilevel Constraints** regarding becoming a foster family. Within this theme, five sub-themes were found. Experiencing *Worries related to the child* in foster care (including the child’s birth family) (e.g., “I was concerned about how they [birth family] would react to us [foster family], to what extent they would think we were interfering in their lives and to what extent they thought we were responsible for that.”; Foster parent; Female, 56 years old) and the *Anticipation of separation with the child* (e.g., fear of the foster family connecting with the child and when the bond becomes established, suffering with the separation) were emphasised by both staff and foster parents as the most salient barriers (e.g., “[Potential foster families] talk a lot about the end of fostering as an obstacle. How will I cope when the child has to leave? I think this is one of the impediments, cutting off contact with the child, the loss, the suffering inherent in the loss; Professional; Female, 45 years old).

Participants also recognised personal barriers such as *Lack of resources* (including the lack of availability and material resources) (e.g., “Not having the conditions to ensure essential goods or at the same level as their children. When families foster or intend to foster, they intend to offer the child the same [conditions they give to] their children. Be it school attendance, extracurricular activities, etc.”; Professional; Female, 46 years old). On the other hand, they identified *Child protection system constraints*, namely the unpredictable duration of the placement, the fact that the law does not provide for a period in which the foster family remains at home during the child’s integration period. The perception of constraints associated with both the application process and training and assessment, and even the lack of response from the system, seems to inhibit people from becoming foster families (e.g., “At the bureaucratic level there are no justified absences for medical follow-up (...), and even more (...), in the initial phase, they [potential foster families] would need to be at home to be able to take care of the child [and the system doesn’t contemplate that] and this issue sometimes prevents some families from applying”; Professional; Female, 46 years old).

Finally, participants also highlighted *Family-related constraints*, which involve concerns expressed by the foster parents’ extended family regarding the impact of fostering (e.g., potential negative impact of fostering a child on the foster families functioning) (e.g., “They [extended family] at the beginning (...) said “(...) think about it, it is possible that the child will have significant traumas. What if a child comes with health problems? You will become attached to the child and then when he/she leaves you will suffer horrors. Think about it.”; Foster parent; Female, 48 years old). This sub-theme is distinct from earlier references to family-oriented motivations, which involved participants’

own desires to improve their family circumstances. In contrast, family-related constraints referred to concerns expressed by extended family members, such as fears about emotional attachment, trauma, or disruption. These concerns often introduced hesitation or tension in the decision-making process and were described by participants as barriers to fostering.

3.3. Communication and recruitment strategies

Three themes were found regarding the communication and recruitment strategies needed to promote foster care in the Portuguese context. Participants provided several inputs for an **Integrated outreach strategy** (i.e., outreach strategies that reach both a specific target audience, a broader audience, and continuous exposure to the message). They also identified **Diverse communication channels and vehicles** (i.e., delivery of the message through channels such as the media, testimonials, disseminating information in public places and in a face-to-face format, and through word-of-mouth). In addition they provided input about **Message content guidelines** to consider when developing messages to recruit more foster families (i.e., guidelines for the type of information the message should contain, namely system-related information, information regarding the positive impact of fostering, information about current data, the emotional appeals and realistic and accurate messages).

Regarding the first theme, **Integrated outreach strategy**, both staff and foster parents considered that outreach strategies should target specific audiences to deliver the message more effectively (i.e., *Targeting*). Participants reflected on potential target audiences for delivering messages, for example, children, families with children, or families that may already be more willing to foster (“An important way of working on this subject is also in fiction, for example, directed at children, (...) for children to get used to this reality. (...) I see children as being useful from the point of view of children normalising this reality among themselves (...). All realities that are closer are easier to accept, easier to understand.”; Professional; Female, 45 years old). Moreover, participants also suggested that to make foster care more visible the outreach would include a *Systematic strategy*, which means that initiatives should be delivered strategically and continuously over time (e.g., “Campaigns are very targeted at certain times of the year, probably because [staff] have studied [about this], but they should not stop insisting during the rest of the year”; Foster parent; Female, 47 years old).

In addition to the importance of systematic and targeted approaches to recruit foster families, participants also mentioned *Mass marketing* with broad and generic audiences to raise general awareness about foster care (e.g., “[Developing] a campaign that [is] strong. When there are big campaigns, all the media are showing that. All people in one way or another will hear about it. If they don’t hear about it, they’ll talk about it. So, I think that [could be] a way to be able to spread more information.”; Foster parent; Female, 37 years old).

Staff and foster parents also reflected on how these messages could be delivered to potential foster families (i.e., second theme, **Diverse communication channels and vehicles**), suggesting the use of *Media*, namely traditional media such as television, radio, newspaper, billboards and outdoor advertising, or social media such as Instagram or Facebook (e.g., “Digital influencers, (...) people who have children (...), have thousands of followers and have the ability to spread the word message in a different way.”; Foster parent; Female, 44 years old). The use of *Testimonials*, from foster families, children in care, and staff in the area (e.g., “I think it works a lot to know other cases [of] existing foster families. [Sharing] how it worked, managing expectations, so that people can also identify, [and realise] that in fact it is a perfectly normal family, that has children, that works and that manages, that’s it, for people to feel identified.” Foster parent; Female, 44 years old), and *Community-based communication* involving the dissemination of tailored information in local public places and in a face-to-face format (e.g., “In addition to these national campaigns, I think it is important to develop

campaigns at a more local level, places in the community where families are, [in] schools, [for example].”; Professional; Female, 52 years old).

Participants also highlighted the importance of *Word-of-mouth* to enable recruitment efforts (e.g., “Each one of us who works in foster care [system] and who comes into contact with these foster families has a duty, in their network of professional and social relationships, to say “this works”. I think that makes people stop and think and some even apply. They begin to know better what it is.” Professional; Female, 51 years old).

Finally, regarding **Message content guidelines**, third and final theme, participants found that the delivered messages should include *System-related information*, namely information regarding how to become a foster family and the rights of foster families (e.g., “[the message must] state that the law has been changed and that many of the things that harmed foster families and their children have been changed to the benefit of foster families themselves. [It] draws attention.”; Foster parent; Female, 46 years old) and provide information regarding the *Positive impact of fostering*, namely on child development and well-being (e.g., “Realising the impact of residential care on a child and realising that foster care has a more positive impact, I think that also leads people to make this decision. (...) That would also be important [disclose].”; Professional; Female, 41 years old).

In addition to system-related information and positive impact of fostering, participants suggested to link testimonials with information about current *Data* to highlight the scale of the problem and the fact that many children in residential care need a foster family (e.g., “[How] Portugal is different from other countries. In other countries foster care prevails and children in residential care are the exception and not the rule. [It’s important] to compare in terms of numbers with the reality in Portugal.”; Professional; Female, 43 years old) and to use *Emotionally appealing messages*, that is, to include content that appeals to people’s emotions such as empathy (e.g., “Asking a child “what is your wish?” because I know that many would say “I want to have a family”. A person who hears this, I think gets goosebumps.”; Foster parent; Female, 37 years old).

Finally, participants considered important to develop messages with realistic information, contemplating both the positive and the challenging aspects of foster care, as well as the provision of clear and accurate information about foster care – *Realistic and accurate messages* (e.g., “I think it was important to disclose (...) real experiences, not [only] experiences where everything went well. Experiences in which the difficulties, the good things, and the balance of this are discussed.”; Professional; Female, 40 years old).

4. Discussion

One of the central challenges in improving the protection of children in alternative care is to increase the number of foster families who are qualified and equipped to meet children’s needs (Contreras & Muñoz, 2016; Sebba, 2012). To support effective outreach and recruitment, it is important identify the barriers and enablers associated with becoming a foster family in a context-sensitive way. This study addressed this need by examining the perspectives of foster families and staff to: 1) explore factors linked with public awareness about foster care; 2) provide a more integrated view of barriers and enablers to becoming a foster family; and 3) generate insights to guide strategy and content development for campaigns to promote foster care and recruit foster families. Fig. 1 provides an overview of our aims and findings.

Participants reported that both the general public and professionals within the child protection system in Portugal often have limited knowledge about foster care. While this is a qualitative study and regional variation may occur, the lack of knowledge is critical when thinking about recruiting new families, given that familiarity is an essential condition for awareness about foster care and, consequently, for the decision to foster (Diogo & Branco, 2017, 2020; Gouveia et al., 2021). This aligns with the COM-B system, which posits that deliberate

behavioural engagement requires individuals to have sufficient psychological capability, including knowledge and awareness (Michie et al., 2011). In this context, lack of knowledge and awareness about how the foster care system operates (e.g., procedures and requirements) can lead to uncertainty and a lower intention or motivation to become a foster family.

Participants also identified several reasons for becoming a foster family, including child-centred motivations, family-related reasons, and belief-driven motivations. Viewed in light of the COM-B system (Michie et al., 2011), these factors can be framed as reflective processes (i.e., conscious beliefs, values, goals) under the Motivation domain. The desire to help a child and promote their integration into a family supports the child's right to grow up in a family (Magalhães et al., 2022). This is the main purpose of foster care and therefore, it is not surprising that having these values and goals was well aligned with the motivation to becoming a foster family. Participants also mentioned family-centred reasons by perceiving benefits of being foster parent for themselves and their family members (e.g., need to fill the "empty nest"). However, child-centred reasons may be associated with a greater likelihood of foster parent retention (Rodger et al., 2006), while self-centred motivations may lead to fewer and shorter placements (Rhodes et al., 2006). Of note, financial considerations did not appear in our interviews as a motivation variable to becoming a foster families, which is in line with previous research (e.g., Baer & Diehl, 2019; Leber & Lecroy, 2012). Baer and Diehl (2019) highlighted that financial compensation might facilitate and help foster children in need, which means that it might be a condition to be able to foster children at risk, but foster parents did not explicitly identify financial incentives as the main driver of fostering.

In our study, reflective motivational processes such as child-centred motivations and family-related reasons were identified as enablers to becoming a foster family, but these motivations were combined with a set of resources. Participants recognised formal social support (i.e., availability and follow-up by the professional team), as well as the provision of training and preparation (considered adequate) and informal support (i.e., family, friends, neighbours) as important resources in their decision to become foster families. Specifically, the perception that families would receive social support allowed them to make this decision and mitigated fears they had before the initial enquiry. Prior research has identified social support as a protective factor, given that a positive perception of social support is associated with greater perceived capability in managing the challenges that emerge from foster care (e.g., children's behaviour) and, in turn, a greater intention to become a foster family (Ciarrochi et al., 2012; Piel et al., 2017; Raudkivi, 2020). This suggests that a positive and supportive environment strengthens social opportunity to becoming a foster family, as viewed with the lens of the COM-B system (Michie et al., 2011). It also seems to strengthen the parents perceived self-efficacy to deal with the anticipated challenges, in line with the HAPA model (Schwarzer, 2008). This social support, whether formal or informal, should make foster parents feel more confident in performing this role and mitigate doubts and barriers they had regarding foster care.

In addition, participants revealed that they had optimistic beliefs regarding their ability to be a foster family (perceived self-efficacy, HAPA model; Schwarzer, 2008). High perceived self-efficacy is linked with the likelihood of engaging in a new behaviour (Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020). Along with self-efficacy beliefs, participants acknowledged having caregiving skills and social skills, which in their view facilitated the behaviour of becoming a foster family. These are skills considered important for the foster parent role, considering that this role requires, in addition to parental skills, social skills that allow foster parents to support the child's relationship with their birth family, but also with the care system teamwork (Berrick & Skivenes, 2012; Van Hoen et al., 2019). This is also consistent with the COM-B system, namely in terms of the Capability domain, which requires the individual to have the knowledge and relevant skills to engage in the new behaviour (Michie et al., 2011; West & Michie, 2020). Additional individual

resources such as having a supportive household dynamic seemed to be a relevant requirement to care for a child in foster care, therefore time and housing conditions were also seen as important to becoming a foster family. This is consistent with input from the COM-B system that a lack of material opportunities and resources (i.e., lack of opportunity) compromises the desired behavioural outcomes (Michie et al., 2011). It is also consistent with input from the HAPA model, which suggests that if families do not have access to these resources, they may feel unable to engage in the behaviour as this limits their self-efficacy (Schwarzer, 2008; Schwarzer & Hamilton, 2020).

System resources were also identified as a relevant factor, in addition to social support and individual resources. Participants recognised changes in Portuguese legislation (e.g., legal rights for foster families; ISS, 2021) as an important development for becoming a foster parent. Viewing these findings in the light of the COM-B system (Michie et al., 2011), these resources can be framed at the level of social and physical (i.e., material) opportunities, to the extent that the political system values foster care and empowers foster families. This finding highlights the impact of public policies and legislative support actions on the recruitment of potential foster families (Leber & LeCroy, 2012; Michie et al., 2011), as new opportunities can also increase motivation (Mayne, 2016). Moreover, in light of the HAPA model, this context might also strengthen perceived self-efficacy, insofar as the recognition of a social and legal context that promotes foster care can contribute to greater optimism in performing the role of foster parent. Another important system resource reported by our participants was the positive perception about the foster care system. Previous studies have shown that when people trust the public institutions (e.g., the government), they are also more likely to engage in prosocial, cooperative, and altruistic behaviours (Han et al., 2023; Hetherington, 1998; Rubin et al., 2009). Here, believing in the competence of the child protection system seemed to be linked with a greater confidence in its functioning and, consequently, a greater willingness to foster. The opposite appeared to be a barrier, that is, child protection system constraints were identified as compromising the likelihood of becoming a foster family.

In this study, foster parents also expressed concerns regarding foster care, such as worries related to the child in foster care, their birth family, and family related constraints. Foster parents were concerned about putting their family's safety at risk and, in turn, participants had the perception that members of the extended family of foster parents were concerned that becoming a foster family might compromise foster parents' health and well-being. These worries were possibly associated with negative social representations about children in alternative care and their birth families (e.g., negative child behaviour; Raudkivi, 2020). Potential foster families and their extended family may in some cases perceive foster care as a threat to their safety and emotional stability, which in turn is identified as a barrier in decision-making (Bertalanffy, 1969). This may be seen as a negative outcome expectation in light of the HAPA model (Schwarzer, 2008), and a motivational barrier in light of the COM-B system (Michie et al., 2011). Finally, the anticipation of separation with the child, identified as a constraint in this study, is in line with previous findings that demonstrated that foster families experience significant suffering in moments of transition, this being one of the factors that affect the recruitment of new foster families and the respective maintenance of existing foster families (Hebert et al., 2013). Likewise, it might be seen as a relevant motivational barrier (COM-B system; Michie et al., 2011) and a challenge that might require the anticipation of strategies to mitigate this barrier (coping planning, coping self-efficacy, HAPA model; Schwarzer, 2008).

Regarding our third aim, participants suggested that campaigns should be sustained and continuous. There is evidence that a greater frequency of exposure to a campaign can lead to favourable outcomes (Snyder, 2007), but this needs to be balanced against risks of over-exposure and message fatigue, which may lead to reactance and inattention to the message and thus lower effectiveness (e.g., Kim & So, 2018). Participants also reflected on potential target audiences for

message delivery, which is aligned with social marketing principles in terms of audience analysis and segmentation (Bates, 2010). Past research shows that it is important for implementers to identify and describe their target audience(s) and tailor specific messages to different segments (e.g., Bates, 2010; Brennan et al., 2020). In addition to recommending tailored outreach strategies, participants also mentioned the importance of broader campaigns to raise public awareness about foster care among the general population (Wakefield et al., 2010). Considering the current lack of knowledge and public awareness, these strategies may be particularly useful to provide meaningful knowledge when developing recruitment campaigns.

In addition to these outreach strategies, participants reflected on how messages could be delivered to potential foster families, suggested using communication channels that have been used in the context of foster care, namely mass media (e.g., Delfabbro et al., 2008; López et al., 2010), but also other potentially effective channels such as word-of-mouth and community-based communication (Cox et al., 2003; Rodger et al., 2006). Investing in these channels might yield advantages by allowing interpersonal contact and the opportunity to share questions and doubts between the community and foster families (Cox et al., 2003). Testimonials were emphasised by participants as a potentially effective approach, by giving voice to those who go through the experience, which can increase perceived credibility. Credibility is linked with message effectiveness (Martín-Santana et al., 2018) and narratives can be seen by the audience as more personal, realistic, credible, and memorable (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007).

Finally, participants gave input about content guidelines, which are critical to developing communication products and campaigns (Zhao, 2020). Participants argued that the messages should convey realistic information (i.e., contemplating both the positive and challenging aspects of foster care, as well as clear and accurate information about foster care), which means including also obstacles and not merely positive aspects (Boeijinga et al., 2017). Providing system-related information, namely information regarding how to become a foster family and the rights of foster families seems to be also important. Similarly, information about current data on foster care, highlighting that many children are placed in residential care but need a foster family, and providing information regarding the positive impact of fostering, namely on child development and well-being, were highlighted in the current study. In addition to these content guidelines, participants mentioned the importance of including emotionally appealing messages, which is consistent with evidence that strong emotional responses to a message can impact attitudes and behavioural outcomes (Green & Clark, 2013).

4.1. Limitations and implications for research and practice

Despite the contributions of this present study, it is important to note some limitations that should be addressed in future studies. Our qualitative, multi-informant approach was appropriate to generate insight about the issues approached here, but additional input from more representative and diverse samples is needed, including care experienced children and young people and participants from other contexts to account for cultural variability in public awareness about foster care, barriers and enablers to becoming a foster family, and inputs for outreach campaigns. In addition, we do not have information on how many families or professionals did not agree to participate, which would be important to better frame the results of this study. Despite these limitations, the current findings provide meaningful implications to advance the field and to inform outreach strategies. Considering that limited knowledge and awareness are linked with a lower likelihood of becoming a foster family (De Maeyer et al., 2014; Randle et al., 2012; Sebba, 2012), it may be worthy to consider approaches that target broad audiences to raise general awareness about foster care. In addition, following our participants' suggestions as well as principles of social marketing, it may be relevant to complement these generic approaches

with more strategic, tailored efforts (Bates, 2010; Brennan et al., 2020) that target families with children or families that may already be more willing to foster.

Regarding the content of the outreach messages and campaigns, given the input from our participants and the evidence that most foster families are mobilised by child-centred motivations (Canali et al., 2016; De Maeyer et al., 2014; Diogo & Branco, 2017; López & Del Valle, 2016; Rodger et al., 2006; Sebba, 2012), it may be relevant to highlight the role of foster families in the development and well-being of children and young people. Our participants also suggested illustrating the scale of this social need, as there is a lack of foster families in the system and ensuring that the messages elicit an emotional response. This is consistent with the notion that emotional appeals may activate emotional responses and mobilise action through affective processes (Akbari, 2015; Leonidou & Leonidou, 2009).

The discussion about social and system resources also provided input on additional content to consider in the outreach messages. It may be relevant to show that the child protection system provides formal social support before and during foster care (e.g., follow-up by a professional team, as well as the provision of training and preparation). It may also be relevant to address some of the challenges and concerns identified by participants, such as the anticipation of separation with the child (e.g., by showing that the child's departure is contemplated in the training and that staff provide support on this matter). Regarding the system's resources, since positive perceptions of the system were seen as an enabler to becoming a foster family, outreach efforts could for example include testimonials to highlight accomplishments of the foster care system despite the challenges it faces and demonstrate the commitment of the staff who work in the system. Participants also suggested that providing practical information on how to become a foster family could help increase capability and motivation to become a foster parent. Similarly, they considered it important to provide accurate and realistic information about the topic. Providing information about foster care can help address negative social representations of children in alternative care and their birth families (e.g., negative child behaviour; Raudkivi, 2020).

4.2. Conclusions

This study identified barriers and enablers to becoming a foster family from the perspectives of both foster parents and staff. It also provided a theoretically grounded structure for interpreting these perspectives in ways that reveal points of practical leverage – for example, enhancing social support to increase perceived capability and opportunity, or preparing families for transitions through action and coping planning. These findings may help inform both general and targeted recruitment strategies that address motivational factors (such as values, expectations, and confidence in caregiving abilities) as well as structural conditions (such as low public visibility of foster care, procedural rigidity, and availability of tailored support at key moments in the foster care process). As such, the study provides a useful starting point for future work seeking to operationalise behaviour change principles in the context of foster family recruitment.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Sofia Ferreira: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Eunice Magalhães:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Vânia S. Pinto:** Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **João Graça:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Due to the nature of the study and the risk that interview transcripts could directly or indirectly compromise participants' anonymity, participants were assured that the dataset would not be shared outside the research team.

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